Wildfire & the Media

Sensationalism Vs. Facts

Fires Burn Out of Control! Headlines such as this cause public concern, excite emotions and make news to sell. In highly tense situations, burning wildfires provide great stories filled with emotion and drama. All this, combined with visions of flames and smoke, guarantees a highly sensational story.

The media has an important duty to inform the public about key events and the responsibility to report the events accurately. Often, stories on wildfires focus on the emotion of the moment, including interviews with weary fire-fighters or concerned people on the street, rather than on the scientific aspects of what is happening. Information about fire ecology or fire history is not usually covered until much later. As a result, visions of burning, home-covered hills, inciting public emotions, only intensify the situation.

Highly intensified events, such as wildfires, also contribute to the formation of public opinion, and may influence policy. In May 2000, a prescribed fire in Bandelier National Monument, New Mexico, got out of control and became a highly publicized event. Normally, this fire would not have drawn much media attention; however, homes burned, and the fire threatened a nuclear weapons facility within the Los Alamos National Laboratory. As a result, the practice of prescribed burns went under close scrutiny, and all scheduled prescribed burns were put on hold throughout the country.

In 1988, fires burned throughout Yellowstone National Park. These fires were also highly publicized and sensationalized. As a result, the public formed opinions about how the land managing agencies responded to the fires, and therefore, forced a review of government policy.

When all is said and done, some of the information reported by the media is often incorrect and/or sensationalized. In the formation of public opinion and policy, an accurately informed public only serves to help promote a better understanding of fire ecology. Facts on how fire works and the results of fire on the ecosystem provide valuable information.